

“Polarization: Growing Beloved Community”

Isaiah 2:3-5; Philippians 2:1-8

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Today in Canada and other developed countries around the world we are experiencing unprecedented polarization and division. While at the beginning of the pandemic people would bang pots in support of health care workers, months later there would be protests at hospitals against health care workers and health care COVID Protocols. One doctor reflected that while little old ladies used to bring cookies to the office, these days little old ladies are more likely to swear and give you the finger. You may have your own story of how polarization has impacted you. Have you lost friends, stopped speaking with family members, changed churches, left a community group, or like one of my friends, lost your spouse over it?

American journalist, Nathan Bomey in his new book *Bridge Builders: Bringing People Together in a Polarized Age* identifies a new phenomenon called the Exhausted Majority. At a time when you can't get 67% of Americans to agree on anything, he says that 67% of Americans say they are exhausted and want something different than polarizing divisions. I suspect the same may be true here. Last week we sought to understand why polarization has escalated. Today we consider our calling as Christians in the face of such divisive polarization and ask, "What would it take for the church to be a place that spawns unifying conversations?"

If you have read the New Testament you know that the early church was no stranger to conflict. In the book of Acts we find that Paul is in conflict with Barnabas. In the rest of Acts there is conflict between Paul and other Jewish Christians about interpreting the Bible. In Romans, four chapters are devoted to the conflict in the early church. First Corinthians is written to the hyper divided church. Our 1 Corinthians 13 "Love Passage" about love being patient and kind was not written for a wedding—but for a church fight. Ephesians calls for unity in a divided church. Which brings us to Philippians where there is conflict in the local church.

Given this degree of conflict, some of you may conclude that the church will just always be fighting. Or, does the New Testament really tell us that human conflict is normal and that the church needs to not be afraid to openly name conflict and to show a better way of facing into it. We all struggle with the tendency to divide, to be polarized, to have distain towards someone who is different from us—who holds a different view or comes from a different background. This is who we are as human beings.

Yet Scripture challenges us to demonstrate that we can stay together even when we disagree. There is opportunity in each conflict. It allows a release of the negative energy that would otherwise get buried and pushed down. It also focuses attention on a problem that has been previously ignored or neglected and that needs to be solved. Dealt with in a healthy way, conflict allows different points of view to get expressed **together**. And through such dialogue the Spirit can creatively spark something brand new.

We don't know exactly what lay at the root of the discord in the Philippian church. There could have been polarization around two women who were at odds with each other. Or Paul himself might have been the source of some relational issues. Whatever the issue or cause, the problem was apparently rather serious. So Paul is writing this letter to this house church at Philippi to deal with this polarization in the congregation.

Paul challenges the Philippians to live among the local people in a way that is informed and shaped by the Gospel of Christ. In today's passage he begins with their strengths. The "if" at the beginning of this passage can throw you a bit: "If, then there is any comfort in Christ..." What Paul is really intending to say is "Since" you have comfort in Christ, and consolation from love, and a spirit of community and affection," you have the building blocks to grow even greater faith and maturity in the Gospel. To grow to this next level requires a deeper team effort, a standing together, a striving side by side together; as fellow athletes who are so completely a team that they function as one person, having one spirit and one soul. "Make my joy complete" writes Paul, "be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind."

Paul is not advocating a straight-jacketed, self-erasing, homogeneity. He doesn't mean that they all have to think the same or necessarily agree on everything. Paul is suggesting that it's more like being on the same team and being shaped by a common attitude or orientation, a common love that brings unity.

Some of you will be watching some great soccer this week from the World Cup. A soccer team has very different players with different outlooks, with different gifts and with differing abilities. Yet the differences complement each other when they work together in one common orientation of getting that ball between the goal posts. Every player is needed.

Paul here reminds the Philippians of the event that created and defined their common orientation and their life together. And that is the life, death and resurrection of Christ. "He made himself nothing," the apostle Paul writes. He not only was no longer living in

exalted heights, he even ended up dying the worst, most public of all deaths: crucifixion. And he did it all out of a humble love of astonishing proportions. “If you want to get the hang of the incarnation,” C.S. Lewis once wrote, “just imagine how you’d feel if you woke up one morning to discover you had turned into a garden slug.”

Jesus’ whole life is a drama of humility. From his birth in an animal shed to his willingness to go out to the marginalized, excluded, and unlovable—even his enemies. Paul reminds us that humility is at the very core of who God is and how God reveals him in Jesus Christ. In his living, Jesus shows us that humility is the freedom of being able to lay down the terrible burden of needing to get our own way—and surrendering to God’s way in the service of others. Prayer and service are the two activities that grow such humility.

“Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit,” writes Paul, “but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others.” *“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.”*

In baptism, we are birthed into a distinct community where what makes us community is a common experience of God’s grace on the cross. Before an experience of that grace our thoughts can be highly selfish. But the amazing grace of God can free us. When I can accept that I have weaknesses and flaws; that I have sinned against God and against my brothers and sisters—but have been forgiven; then I can also extend grace to others and accept their weaknesses and flaws as God has also forgiven me. Because I am never 100% right. There is always value in listening to other points of view.

When we base our identity and worth on relationship to Jesus, such grace frees us to be compassionate toward others—to enjoy them for who they are rather than what they can give us. When we humble ourselves, God is able to work through us to do Christ’s will moving us to live from faith rather than fear, from hope rather than cynicism, from love rather than selfishness, and from God’s power rather than our own power.

The goal of Jesus’ ministry is to invite us into this most intimate community of self-offering and self-giving that is able to make us one. Authentic community grows when we share our weaknesses with each other—not merely our successes. People are nurtured by humility, because humility is truth and is a sign of the very presence of God. Such truth brings people together who otherwise would never be together. And such a diverse community convinces the world of the truth of Jesus; the quality of our community is truly the secret of our mission to the world.

The Church of the Resurrection in Kansas City is encouraging people to sit down with those who have polarized opinions. I want to conclude with a short clip from one of those conversations. You will see the beginning and end of this 35-minute conversation. They talked about the issues that were critical to each of them. They found that they didn't agree—but they discovered that they also didn't have an accurate view of where the other person stood. This is a step that all of us can take. And if we did, how might the world change? **(Clip)**

The goal is not that we agree, but that we create a community that is beloved in Christ. We don't always need to be right, but we do need to be humble and kind. Such beloved community is a framework for the future and is the hope of our polarized world. Amen.